

Committee on Resources,

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans

[fisheries](#) - - Rep. Wayne Gilchrest, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6232 - - (202) 226-0200

Witness Statement

Testimony By
Dr. Rollin D. Sparrowe, President
Wildlife Management Institute
Before The
Fishery, Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans Resources Subcommittees
U. S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515
March 29, 2001

Mr. Chairman:

The Wildlife Management Institute is pleased to be before this Committee again to discuss the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS). We, and others, are working to continue to elevate the NWRS in the public dialogue, especially with a new Administration in place. We have been before this Committee several times in recent years, concerning organic legislation for refuges, operation and maintenance needs, cooperative efforts by private organizations to enhance refuges and volunteer support for refuges. Most recently, we appeared to support the National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Act that originated with this Subcommittee in the last Congress. We congratulate you on the successful passage of that legislation.

We continue to work with the Cooperative Alliance for Refuges Enhancement (CARE) on operational and maintenance needs of the refuge system, and we have spent considerable staff time interacting with the Fish and Wildlife Service on the full spectrum of refuge issues, including understanding the Maintenance Management System (MMS), the Refuge Operating Needs System (RONS), the Comprehensive Conservation Planning (CCP) process and the ongoing policy development process. We commend you and this Committee for the continuing attention to this important, bipartisan movement to improve the management of national wildlife refuges for fish, wildlife and the people of America.

As you will recall, the unifying interest of the now 19 member CARE Group is in securing adequate operation and maintenance funding for the refuge system. This simple premise is predicated on the fact that refuge managers cannot provide for the needs of wildlife or people without the staff and money to conduct necessary monitoring, active management of biological resources and habitats, or provide for public use programs as called for under the 1997 Refuge Improvement Act. This Act clearly states that refuges are primarily for wildlife and that other uses, including priority public uses such as hunting, fishing, wildlife, photography, environmental education and interpretation are dependent upon having healthy wildlife. Additional resources are clearly needed to take advantage of the opportunities to enhance wildlife populations and public uses of refuges.

With the help of this and other committees in the Congress, the past Administration and supporters of the refuge system, more of our national wildlife refuges are operating closer to their full potential. This has

happened as the result of bi-partisan support from Congress to provide funding through the regular appropriations process as well as supplemental funding through the Transportation Enhancement Act. This collective support rests on careful documentation of the needs and enhanced accountability for the use of new money by the Fish and Wildlife Service (Service). To satisfy the commitment of CARE members to strong fiscal accountability, as well as provide an additional perspective to the Service, CARE has conducted an analysis of the use of new funds. We have attached, as part of this testimony, the latest available report on the use of these funds by the Service to reduce the refuge maintenance and operations backlog. Another such analysis will be conducted within the next few months and will be sent to your Committee as a follow-up item. In addition, CARE is in the process of updating our plan for the refuge system and entitled *Restoring American's Wildlife Legacy* and will send it to you as well. As aside, I would like to commend the Service for their full cooperation during these analyses. CARE has asked some tough questions, and the Service has responded in a very business like manner.

It is important to recognize that the backlog of needs on national wildlife refuges includes more than maintenance. Maintenance is generally more easily understood because it consists of buildings, water control devices, roads, other physical facilities and structures of a refuge. The Service has been closely working with other agencies within the Department of the Interior to standardize terms and schedules for maintenance items. We have made significant progress in meeting these needs.

However, we have made much less progress in securing funding for operational needs. Operational needs are, generally, less tangible and include a staff and money to conduct monitoring, biological investigations, public use surveys, educational programs and the myriad of things that go into maintaining and enhancing the fish and wildlife resources so that it can be made available to people in the most appropriate way. Many operating needs cannot be expressed in a single year or two of funding, but remain an ongoing costs as part of the business of running the refuge.

Congress, and others, have requested that the Service review their operating needs in detail. The Service has responded and developed an "Essential Staffing Vacancies" report that clearly identifies the staff needs on a refuge-by-refuge basis. The Service has also re-evaluated its Refuge Operational Needs System (RONS) and its ranking priorities, so the highest priority projects are clearly identified. In developing these priorities, the Service has organized the operating needs of in the RONS database into two-tiers.

The top tier (Tier 1) contains the highest priority needs of the refuge system, as called for by the appropriations committee, for essential staffing vacancies, critical mission projects and new and significantly expanded refuges. The essential staffing vacancies report listed 1350 vacancies that are crucial to baseline management of National Wildlife Refuges. The high priority critical mission projects are essential to the refuge system to meet the first mandate of the Refuge Improvement Act. The projects include biological monitoring and surveys, habitat management, public use opportunities and other projects that allow the System to meet its mission to the American people.

As an example, of the types of "Tier 1" needs, identified, the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge in Maryland lists the following projects: (1) control of invading exotic species, (2) enhancement of the volunteer program, (3) development of the new visitor center exhibits, (4) restoration for and protection of Smith Island, (5) employment of a full-time, law enforcement officer, and (6) funding for several additional biological and public use projects on the refuge. We urge this Committee to understand the operating needs question so these needs may be communicated more clearly to future appropriators.

The Comprehensive Conservation Planning (CCP) process for the National Wildlife Refuge System has

drawn considerable interest during their development. Currently, 22 CCPs have been completed, and 72 are underway. However, approximately 200 remain to be started. Each of these plans is extremely labor intensive and we have concerns that the current level of funding will not allow their completion by 2012, as required by the Refuge Improvement Act. WMI staff has reviewed and commented on individual policies and have interacted with refuge managers on CCPs in virtually all areas of the country. Attached, is an example of the types of comments we have provided on an individual CCP. While we fully support this planning process, we have additional concerns about the Services financial ability to implement them once they are completed.

In addition to the CCP process, there also has been the development and distribution for public comment on an array of operating policies for the national wildlife refuge system. These new policies, when finalized, are designed to implement the Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 and aid refuge managers in providing consistent management of refuge programs. A recent policy circulated by the Service considered ecological integrity on the national wildlife refuge system. This policy attempted to define terms that were included in the Refuge Improvement Act, but have not previously been defined, and which the wildlife profession has had difficulty grappling with for many years. The response to this policy was widespread, partly because of the newness of the process, but mostly because the first draft seemed to be considerably off the mark. To its credit, the Service listened carefully to a wide array of comments and made significant changes before they finalized this policy.

Additional policies are in the process of being developed, commented on and finalized. While we fully support the development of these policies we strongly believe they must be done carefully, with full public input. Where we have encountered problems with CCP's, it has been clear that some refuge managers might have benefitted from firm internal policies rather than being left to make their own interpretations. We still see some individual and regional differences in the approach to certain issues concerning public use. To avoid inadvertently setting new standards for program conduct, these policies must clearly reflect: (1) the purposes of individual refuges, (2) the mission of the system, or (3) commonsense in avoiding making problems where none exist. If the Service's responsiveness in revising the Ecological Integrity policy is any indication, we are confident that the Service is motivated by a desire to provide its refuge managers clear consistent guidance to fully implement the Refuge Improvement Act and is open to suggestions from the public.

I want to thank this Committee for holding this hearing. To me it is further evidence that the needs of the National Wildlife Refuge System are indeed real, well documented, widely supported and beginning to get the attention that they rightfully deserve.

#